

## On the structure and culture of MIT GSU spaces

July DD, 2023

We, the undersigned current and former Department Organizers (DOs), Bargaining Committee (BC) members, other organizers, and rank-and-file members of the MIT Graduate Student Union (MITGSU), have concerns regarding the lack of collective, transparent decision-making and sustainable strategy within the organizing space of our union, as we continue to bargain for our first contract and strategize for escalation.

Many of us have been involved on and off with our union for years now, and we have organized and talked with our coworkers through the various stages of unionization. We believe we are now at a critical juncture where we must establish **transparent and democratic structures that respect and value our members as equals** in our fight for respect from our employers, lest we end up recreating the same hierarchy we set out to dismantle. The following issues pose the greatest challenges to retention of engaged membership and thus the strength, durability, and credibility of our union:

1. **We need a more coherent organizational model that engages our membership (especially departmental leaders) in major union decisions.** In the absence of a persistent structure for CAT, DOC, and Action Committee membership, loose norms and interpersonal ties determine which networks one must be a part of to have a say in a union that ultimately represents and relies on ALL of us– while our elected representatives risk burnout from having to wear too many hats.
2. **Major strategic and structural decisions are made during private BC meetings and other closed venues.** While we recognize the need to consult with our more experienced UE staff on decisions such as open bargaining and whether to hold DO elections, members outside of the BC are excluded from the deliberative process and unengaged with UE staff. By neglecting to create the time and space needed to consider alternatives and deliberate collectively, our current decision-making structure stands at odds with our principles of rank-and-file unionism.
3. **CAT meetings have been diverted by skill-building tasks, inoculation, and the rubber-stamping of pre-decided actions.** Instead of informing organizers on centrally-decided calls to action, CAT meetings should be a time for thoughtful discussions about and revisions to strategy and policy decisions. Department DOs should feel empowered to build off of organizing strategies devised at CAT and adapt them as needed for their own departments.
4. **A persistent sense of urgency and a quantification of processes pervade our organizing, emulating toxic elements of academia.** By striving for specific and predetermined metrics, we risk losing sight of our actual goals around long-term engagement of our membership. As we fight for safe and fair working conditions at MIT, we must ensure that union organizing itself is a safe space with clear expectations. The “always on” culture of academia should not be something we emulate in our own organization, but the constant flow of urgent asks of organizers does just that. Reducing the barrier to participation will encourage more members to stay involved,



instead of shutting out all but a few people who are able to attend every meeting and put in a lot of extra time.

5. **Our union's organizing model is rigid, and suggestions to consider creative alternatives are often dismissed.** Since the membership of our union is unlike any other that UE has organized in the past, our **organizing strategy must be flexible and adaptable** to respond to MIT's broad diversity of departments and programs. We lack a forum for providing feedback from organizers on whether our organizing practices are working on the ground. Instead, we select for a subset of organizers who are comfortable with our current methods, while we lose other enthusiastic and supportive organizers who are familiar with the culture of their departments and know best how to talk with their own coworkers and friends. **Organizing is a two-way street, but our current structures provide no avenue for the crucial flow of information from membership to core organizers.**

We believe that solutions to these problems must be determined democratically, through robust institutions that can hold up our rank and file union. We must empower our organizers to connect with their networks on their own terms, and to engage in deliberative strategizing around the future of GSU.

As we think ahead to drafting a constitution after our eventual contract ratification, we propose adopting an interim constitution and bylaws. **We urgently propose the formation of a committee on governance that is tasked with critically evaluating strategy and drafting guidelines for MITGSU to follow, and is empowered to oversee the implementation of these guidelines.** An appendix to this letter lists a set of initial considerations to be taken up by this committee.

As longtime organizers, we believe deeply in our movement and in our strength when we act collectively. We are committed to the fight for respect in academia and to reclaiming our rights as graduate workers. Yet we worry that our current trajectory risks alienating our membership in ways that may abruptly materialize when we most critically need to stand strong together. We hope that by addressing these concerns now, we can build a union wherein all of us feel respected and valued—one that not only gains us the respect we deserve from the MIT administration, but also charts a path for the countless grad unions that are fighting alongside us. As a founder of UE once wrote, "The manner in which workers achieve results is equally as important as the results themselves."

In solidarity,

1. NAME  
[Current/Former] [Department] [BC rep/DO/organizer/general member]
2. NAME  
[Current/Former] [Department] [BC rep/DO/organizer/general member]
- ...

Fill out [this form](#) to add your name to the signatory list on this letter.



**Appendix 1: Definitions**

BC: Bargaining Committee (an elected position by departments)

DO: Department Organizer (formerly an elected position by departments)

DOC: Department Organizing Committee (originally DO + BC)

CAT: Contract Action Team

UE: United Electrical, Radio & Machine Workers of America

GSU staff: Part- or full-time hired staff members who work primarily with MITGSU. This includes staff funded with GSU dues, as well as those hired on a project basis by UE to assist the MITGSU campaign.

UE national staff: Staff members who work primarily with, and represent, UE at the national level